



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (ASC)

Annenberg School for Communication

5-1957

Notes on a Natural History of Fads

Rolf Meyerson

Elihu Katz

University of Pennsylvania, ekatz@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meyerson, R., & Katz, E. (1957). Notes on a Natural History of Fads. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62 (6), 594-601. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/154

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/154

For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Notes on a Natural History of Fads

Abstract

The natural history of fads of fashions, a particular type of social change, is told as a succession of chronological stages, each characterized by the interaction among producers, distributors, and consumers. The process is thus: discovery of the potential fad, promotion by the discoverers and/or original consumers, labeling, dissemination, eventual loss of exclusiveness and uniqueness, death by displacement.

Keywords

fads, fashions, social change

Disciplines

Communication

NOTES ON A NATURAL HISTORY OF FADS¹

ROLF MEYERSON AND ELIHU KATZ

ABSTRACT

The natural history of fads or fashions, a particular type of social change, is told as a succession of chronological stages, each characterized by the interaction among producers, distributors, and consumers. The process is thus: discovery of the potential fad, promotion by the discoverers and/or original consumers, labeling, dissemination, eventual loss of exclusiveness and uniqueness, and death by displacement.

The study of fads and fashions² may serve the student of social change much as the study of fruit flies has served geneticists: neither the sociologist nor the geneticist has to wait long for a new generation to arrive.

Fads provide an extraordinary opportunity to study processes of influence or contagion, of innovative and cyclical behavior, and of leadership; this has been long recognized by social thinkers, most of whom tended, however, to regard fads and fashions as one form of permanent social change.³

To regard change in fads exclusively as a prototype of social change is to overlook several fundamental distinctions. In the first place, the process by which fads operate is typically confined to particular subgroups in society, and, although fads may

change violently and swiftly, the subgroup remains the same; the network of fad communication usually remains stable. On the other hand, patterns of communication that create new social movements—for example, a new religious sect—also create a new social structure; here both the content and the network of communication are new. This distinction is well made by Blumer, who points out that social movements, unlike fads, usually leave stable organizations in their wake:

Not only is the fashion movement unique in terms of its character, but it differs from other movements in that it does not develop into a society. It does not build up a social organization; it does not develop a division of labor among its participants with each being assigned a given status: it does not construct a new set of symbols, myths, values, philosophy, or set of practices, and in this sense does not form a culture; and finally, it does not develop a set of loyalties or form a we-consciousness.⁴

¹ This is a publication of the Center for the Study of Leisure of the University of Chicago which is supported by a grant from the Behavioral Sciences Division of the Ford Foundation. Some of the ideas presented in this paper were formulated several years ago in discussions with colleagues then at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, notably James Coleman, Philip Ennis, William McPhee, Herbert Menzel, and David Sills. We are also grateful to David Riesman and Mark Benney, both at the University of Chicago, for critical comments.

² We choose to ignore the distinction between the two concepts made by previous writers and perhaps most clearly stated by Sapir, who regarded fads as involving fewer people and as more personal and of shorter duration than fashions. He described a fad, furthermore, as "something unexpected, irresponsible or bizarre" and socially disapproved (cf. Edward Sapir, "Fashion," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* [New York: Macmillan Co., 1937], III, 139-44). We apply both terms to transitory phenomena that involve a large number of people or a large proportion of members of a subculture.

³ The long-standing interest among social thinkers in fads and fashions is seen, for example, in Tarde, who contrasted fashion with custom and showed that the transformation of tradition and custom is made possible by the form of imitation known as fashion (see Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation* [New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1903], chap. vii). Sumner regarded a large array of human activities, beliefs, and artifacts as fashions and considered them essential determinants of the *Zeitgeist* (see William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* [Boston: Ginn & Co., 1907], esp. pp. 194-220). Park and Burgess treated fashion as a form of social contagion and as one of the fundamental ways in which permanent social change is brought about (see Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924], chap. xiii).

⁴ Herbert Blumer, "Social Movements," in *New Outline of the Principles of Sociology*, ed. A. M. Lee

Popular music illustrates this distinction.⁵ Every few months a new "content" in the form of new hits flows through the same "network" of distributors (disk jockeys, etc.) and consumers (primarily teen-agers and other radio audiences). While an occasional song may attract some distributors or consumers who are not regularly a part of the system—for example, the recently popular song "Morität" from Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* found high-brow listeners outside the regular music audience—these stray elements usually get out as quickly as they came in. The popular-music world as a whole remains unchanged and goes on as before to produce its continuous cycle of discontinuous hits.

Each new fad is a *functional alternative* for its predecessor: this hit for that hit, this parlor game for that one. On the other hand, the processes involved in broader social changes, such as religious conversions, an increase in the birth rate, or a movement toward suburban living, are too complex to permit simple substitution. Following Merton, who, in arguing against the functional indispensability of a social structure, points out that the range of possible variation is more relevant,⁶ one may say that in fashion the range of functional alternatives is far greater than in other domains of social change.

Perhaps this is so because fashions are found in relatively superficial areas of human conduct—in the trivial or ornamental.

(New York: Barnes & Noble, 1946), pp. 217–18. While fashions do not create social organizations, there is some evidence that a new set of symbols, myths, etc., is apparently often built up in the course of a fashion movement. "Bop talk," for example, could be considered a language built up by the participants of the "bop" fad, and, although extrinsic to the music itself, it nevertheless contributed to "we-consciousness."

⁵ Examples in this paper which deal with popular music are based in part on the general conclusions of an unpublished study of disk jockeys carried out at the Bureau of Applied Social Research by William McPhee, Philip Ennis, and Rolf Meyersohn.

⁶ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), p. 52.

Many more changes have occurred in the styling of automobiles (e.g., in the length of tail lights) than in their engines.⁷ In a brilliant essay on fashion Simmel discusses the selective process whereby some cultural items are subject to fashion and others not, and he points out that the former must be "independent of the vital motives of human action."

Fashion occasionally will accept objectively determined subjects such as religious faith, scientific interests, even socialism and individualism; but it does not become operative as fashion until these subjects can be considered independent of the deeper human motives from which they have risen. For this reason the rule of fashion becomes in such fields unendurable. We therefore see that there is good reason why externals—clothing, social conduct, amusements—constitute the specific field of fashion, for here no dependence is placed on really vital motives of human action.⁸

Triviality, of course, does not refer to the amount of emotion, affect, and functional significance surrounding an object but rather to its life-expectancy, its susceptibility to being *outmoded*. Every object has a finite and estimable life-span; a pair of nylon stockings may last a few weeks, a dress a few years, an automobile a decade or two, a house much longer. It is one of the characteristics of fashion that replacement is made before the life-span ends. Such objects are acquired without regard for their durability. This is one definition of "conspicuous consumption."

Hence we arrive at one possible indication whether an item is a carrier of fashion. Simmel has illustrated this point very well:

When we furnish a house these days, intending the articles to last a quarter of a century, we invariably invest in furniture designed according to the very latest patterns and do not even consider articles in vogue two years before.

⁷ Eric Larrabee and David Riesman, "Autos in America: Manifest and Latent Destiny," in *Consumer Behavior*, Vol. III, ed. Lincoln H. Clark (New York: New York University Press). (In press.)

⁸ Georg Simmel, "Fashion," *International Quarterly*, X (October, 1904), 135. Reprinted in this issue, p. 544.

Yet it is obvious that the attraction of fashion will desert the present article just as it left the earlier one, and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with both forms is determined by other material criteria. A peculiar psychological process seems to be at work here in addition to the mere bias of the moment. Some fashion always exists and fashion per se is indeed immortal, which fact seems to affect in some manner or other each of its manifestations, although the very nature of each individual fashion stamps it as being transitory. The fact that change itself does not change, in this instance endows each of the objects which it affects with a psychological appearance of duration.⁹

Since most fads are of a minority or subculture, they may of course exhibit contradictory or countervailing trends all at once. While the fashion system as a whole may rely on an incompletable life-span for a part of its *élan*, certain subsystems of fashions operate in the opposite way. Thus, the trend today may be to trade in perfectly usable automobiles; yet there are those who drive nothing but antique automobiles. Such people attempt to *exceed* the structural limits of this particular item, and their possessions are as much a part of the fashion system as the latest, newest, the "most unique."¹⁰

Several approaches to the study of fads can be distinguished. One is concerned with the function of fashion generally for society, groups, and individuals. There has been considerable interest in the question why one group rather than another is the carrier of certain fashions; for example, in most societies women are the agents of fashion in clothes, though occasionally, and particularly in deviant societies, it is the men. Simmel relates this to the presence or absence of a class system and/or the need to call attention to one.¹¹

Fashions have also been examined in terms of their specific content, and many attempts have been made to relate a particular trend, style, or motif to a *Zeitgeist*,

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 152. Cf. p. 556 in this issue.

¹⁰ It is to such countervailing minority movements that Sapir applies the word "fad." "A taste which asserts itself in spite of fashion and which may therefore be suspected of having something obsessive about it may be referred to as an individual fad" (*op. cit.*, p. 139).

a "climate of opinion," or an ideology. The unit under examination is a particular rather than a general fashion, as, for example, in the area of dress, in which a great many attempts have been made to relate style to *Zeitgeist*. Flügel has recorded a number of such connections, such as the shift after the French Revolution from clothes as display of ornament to clothes as display of body—which he attributed to the naturalism of the period.¹²

A third approach to fashion deals not with the content of fashions but with the network of people involved. A fashion "system" may be seen in the interaction among producers, distributors, and consumers, which works as a spiral-like closed circuit. Studies have been made, on the one hand, of the several "relay stations," the producers of fashions (such as the designers, the "taste-makers"), and the media that serve them. On the other hand, there has been research on the economics of fashion and on the channels of information and advice that impinge on consumer decisions,¹³ attention usually focusing on individual choices or "effects" without emphasizing the flow from the mass media to groups and, within groups, from person to person. The latter can be done only by beginning with a specific fashion, A or B, tracing its diffusion, as in a fluoroscopic examination, from one consumer to the next.

A fourth approach to the study of fashions, one which differs from the three cited above, though it operates within their

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 130–55. Cf. pp. 541–58 in this issue. See also Talcott Parsons, "An Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification," reprinted in *Essays in Sociological Theory Pure and Applied* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), pp. 166–84; cf. Bernard Barber and Lyle S. Lobel, "'Fashion' in Women's Clothes and the American Social System," in *Class, Status and Power*, ed. Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1953), pp. 323–32. For an interesting historical discussion relating manners to milieu see Harold Nicolson, *Good Behaviour* (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1955).

¹² J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), chap. vii.

¹³ See, e.g., Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956).

orbits, seeks to determine the origin of a given item, the conditions of acceptance by the first participants (the "innovators"), the characteristics of those whom the innovators influence, the shifts from minority to majority acceptance, its waning, and where it goes to die. This is its natural history. The natural history of any phenomenon which is ephemeral and which comprises a specific content (e.g., popular music) with its particular network (e.g., the flow from song writers to publishing companies to record companies to disk jockeys to teen-agers, to juke-box listeners, etc.) can obviously be studied. It is based on the premise that different *stages* of a fad can be isolated and studied. In the past this premise has been used in studies of crowds, race riots, lynching mobs, and even political movements, all of which have been described in terms of discrete evolutionary steps, isolated according to their patterns of person-to-person interaction.¹⁴ Each stage, furthermore, has been described as paving the way for the next stage.

Fads and fashions, too, have been subjected to such analysis. Almost every textbook in social psychology points out how aspirants to social mobility continually try to pre-empt the symbols of higher status, thereby forcing their former holders to search ever for replacements. This is how the story of fashions, and sometimes of all consumer purchasing, is usually told.¹⁵ While it is certainly likely that one function of fashion is in the display of social ascent

and that one network for its transmission is from the upper classes downward, the extent to which this traditional view of fashion remains valid cannot be told without refined empirical study—without tracing the diffusion of particular fads and fashions in time and through their relevant social structures.

In the continuing absence of such refined empirical data, this paper presents on the basis of crude observations some notes on the stages in the natural history of any fad; beginning at the point where some change has just begun to occur, it traces very roughly the fad's probable course.

Fads are not born but rediscovered.—Where do new fads come from? In many instances they have existed all along but not as fads. For example, in the past several years a large number of songs that went under the collective title of "Rhythm and Blues" rose to the top of the "hit parade." Now these songs and this type of music were not new. The music industry had known about them for many years, largely under the title "race records." They had been produced for consumption by a Negro audience, a number of small record companies and publishers devoting themselves almost exclusively to this market. Trade journals carried separate ratings for such music, ranking each new song according to its popularity within this special category.

Then, all of a sudden, "rhythm and blues" songs invaded the general market, and "feedback points" (including the disk jockeys, fan clubs, listings of sheet-music sales, record sales, juke-box sales, etc.) all began to indicate a new trend.¹⁶ This particular new trend had existed for a good long time but in a different audience. It had been a little pocket in the music world as a

¹⁴ E.g., Blumer enumerated the stages of crowd behavior as follows: from "milling" to "collective excitement" to "social contagion" (*op. cit.*, p. 202).

¹⁵ The following may be a typical account: "In recent years status objects of a technical kind have appeared in the home, such as washing, cleaning and polishing machines, and elaborate heating and cooking apparatus. In the United States appliances to provide an artificial climate in the home are the latest in a series of status-conferring devices" (Dennis Chapman, *The Family, the Home and Social Status* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955], p. 23). A discussion of the importance of fads in television sets may be found in Rolf Meyersohn, "Social Research in Television," in *Mass Culture*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).

¹⁶ New trends are reported at least once a week. The uncertainty of prediction in combination with the fact that financial investments are made on the basis of such prediction bring it about that any and all shifts and flutters are exaggerated, and large-scale predictions are made for each and every one of them. This is of course true of all businesses, but many of them (e.g., the stock market) are kept from excesses by various control agencies (e.g., the Securities and Exchange Commission).

whole which sustained it not as a fashion but as a "custom." What happened was that minority music was becoming majority music.

These minority social systems seem to feed many kinds of fashions to the majority. This is true not only of racial groups: the word "minority" is here used in the sense of engaging only a small segment of the population. Some "minorities" are more likely to be fashion-feeders, of course; the classic view of fashion assumes that a minority either in the upper classes or tangential to them engages in certain choices, and these are then "discovered" and made fashionable by lower strata.

This process exists in a variety of fields. The hog-breeding industry, for example, has cyclical trends, and in time a number of "dimensions" of hogs are altered in the prize-winning or champion hogs. Hogs may be well larded or have relatively long legs—results produced by variations in breeding. Some hog-breeders seem to ignore the going fashion, but most of them breed "what the public wants," making appropriate annual changes in breeding. But every once in a while the mantle of fashion descends on one of the ignorers of fashion; he becomes the fashion leader, and his hogs set the style.¹⁷

In areas of life where "new" products are in demand or vital to the continuation of the industry, such "discoveries" are clearly more frequent. Since fashions serve a symbolic function and must be recognized in order to be transmitted, their greatest motility is likely to be found in those areas which are most visible. Thus, changes in dress are likely to be more frequent than in underclothes. Furthermore, the search for something new—what Simmel has called "exceptional, bizarre, or conspicuous"¹⁸—will be greater there.

In the popular-music industry, where such a search is conducted on a monthly basis, the life-span of a "hit" being approximately

that long, new discoveries are essential. Hence, every pocket of the musical world is sooner or later "discovered." "Rhythm and blues" is one of many such pockets, if more successful than some of the others; for a time African songs were hits; South American music has followed this pattern; hill-billy music shows the same trend; even classical music was "discovered" when suddenly the first movement of a Tchaikovsky piano concerto exploded all over America.

Minorities not only provide material to majorities but are also an integral part of the total system. Not only do they offer a pretest—"If it goes well in Tangiers, maybe it has a chance here!"—but they are also a shelf and shelter for dangerous or threatening ideas. Mark Benney suggests that bohémias serve this function. For urban societies their bohémias are a kind of social laboratory. Here something new can be tried out—because it is expected—without threatening either the bohemian minority or the urban population as a whole. The city watches, Benney suggests, and confers respectability on what it likes. Wrought-iron furniture, Japanese scrolls, charcoal-gray flannel suits, not to mention new literary forms and ideological movements, have indeed been bred in these quarters.

The tastemakers.—While the community, the music industry, or the clothing world as a whole may watch and wait for new ideas in many places, the task of scouting seems to fall to one particular set of people. By the nature of their tasks, they must be intimately acquainted with two worlds, the majority and the minority. Fashions, for instance, are often transmitted by the homosexual element in the population or by others who have entree into different realms, Proustian characters who share the values of several groups.

A good example in the popular-music industry is the success of the current artist and repertoire director (the "A&R Man") at Columbia Records, Mitch Miller. A concert oboist himself, he was thoroughly trained as a serious musician. With an established reputation and a semibohemian personality which manifests itself in harmless

¹⁷ This example draws on material presented in a term paper dealing with fashions in hog-raising, by Samuel R. Guard, graduate student, Committee on Communications, the University of Chicago.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 136. Cf. p. 545 in this issue.

ways, such as the wearing of a beard and keeping odd hours, he has been able to utilize good judgment in the popular-music world not only by being better educated but by having a far broader range of minorities to draw on for inspiration. Thus he is familiar with the attributes of French horns and harpsichords, with echo chambers and goat bells, and has been able to use all to full advantage. One reason for his using esoteric "effects" is that in the music industry any popular hit is immediately copied, but his arrangements have been made so complex by the use of such "gimmicks"—as the music industry calls them—that imitation is very difficult. In addition of course, the gimmicks have given Columbia Records a unique reputation.¹⁹

In any case, certain individuals in society are equipped to scout for new ideas and products to feed the various fashion systems. What is perhaps more important is to examine the fate of the original producer of the particular minority "custom" once it has been "exported" and translated into a fashion.

The exporter becomes self-conscious.—At some time in the past Parisian clothes were "discovered" and made fashionable throughout "society" in other countries. Before that, undoubtedly, a stable relationship existed between the Paris *couturières* and their customers, and designs were made with a very particular "audience" in mind. In the course of "discovering" these designs, one element which probably attracted the early innovators was precisely the product which emerged from this relationship. But, once discovered, what happened? As Simmel said, "Paris modes are frequently created with the sole intention of setting a fashion elsewhere."²⁰ The exporter be-

comes self-conscious, tries to appeal to his wider circle of customers, and *changes* the product. Another well-known example is found in oriental porcelain. In the nineteenth century, European art collectors "discovered" Chinese and Japanese pottery, and in a very short time the potters began manufacturing "export ware," creating an industry quite separate from the production of domestic "china." Another example is the shift from the 1954 to the 1955 MG car; the most popular British car in this country, the MG had been designed in a somewhat old-fashioned way, with a square hood; but recently the British Motor Company decided to build it more along the lines of the latest American styles.

There are, of course, some occasions when the exporter does not become self-conscious. This would be most true where there is no return for more: composers who work folk songs into concert music, like Mozart, Beethoven, and Béla Bartók, do not affect the folk "producers."

What happens to the original consumers is not clear. Those who find their own customs—pizza or Yiddish melodies or canasta—becoming widely popular undoubtedly enjoy some sense of pride as well as mixed feelings about the inevitable distortions and perhaps yield to the temptation to make some accommodation from then on in the hope of being "picked up" once again.

Statistical versus real fashions: a case of pluralistic ignorance.—Who can say that something is a fashion? Who knows about it? It may happen that a number of people in various parts of this country, for a variety of reasons, will all buy a certain item. They may all "go in" for "rhythm and blues" music or good musical sound reproduction or raccoon-skin caps, all unaware that others are doing the same thing.

Such situations, in which no one realizes that others are doing the same thing, probably occur all the time. They are similar to what social psychologists have called "pluralistic ignorance," a state in which nobody knows that others maintain an attitude or

¹⁹ In a recent essay on jazz and popular music, Adorno argued that its various forms, whether they be called "swing" or "bebop," are identical in all essential respects and distinguishable by only a few trivial variations, formulas, and clichés. He considers jazz a timeless and changeless fashion (Theodor Adorno, "Zeitlose Mode: Zum Jazz," *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955], pp. 144–61).

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 136. Cf. p. 545 in this issue.

belief identical with their own.²¹ If this coincidence persists long enough, however, the point will be reached at which one cannot help noticing the unself-conscious, "inner-directed" activity of large numbers of people in making identical choices.²² At this point the phenomenon which had been statistical becomes a real fad; here another important stage is reached—the labeling of a fad.

The label and the coattail.—The birth of a fad is really accompanied by two labels; the phenomenon is given a name, and it is named as a fad. The fad is defined as real and in consequence becomes so.

Such a definition, however, must be made not only real but public. It must be translated from the specialized professional, business, or trade vocabulary into more popular terms—in short, into a label or a slogan.

While there are certainly plenty of labels which do not represent fads, there are no unlabeled fads or fashions. It is usually through the label that the fashion acquires fame—even beyond its consumer audience. Thus the "New Look," "hi-fi," "motivation research," "automation," and "charcoal gray."

The ground swell immediately after the labeling is caused partly by the activities of indirectly related enterprises. Machines that yesterday were ordinary phonographs and radios are suddenly called "hi-fi"; coonskin headgear becomes Davy Crockett caps; a lever makes of an industrial machine "automation"; an ordinary open-ended question converts a public opinion survey into "motivation research."

Thus the coattails which dress the fashion. Although the original minorities—whether devotees of recordings of high quality and accurate sound reproduction or Negroes who have been hearing certain

kinds of "pop" music for years—may not recognize the \$29.95 portable radio as "hi-fi" or the ordinary hit of the week as "rhythm and blues," the respective producers have found something that "works," and every commodity within labeling distance has a chance to be included.

The flow.—Where the various fashions find their victims depends on their specific nature. Beginning in the minority, the fad is "discovered," then is labeled, and ultimately reaches the mass audiences. In the case of clothing, there is sometimes a stage, mentioned by Simmel and later by contemporary social psychologists and sociologists, which precedes or accompanies the labeling process, when the fashion is adopted by a group of acknowledged respectability. The fashion is perhaps borrowed from a fringe group within the society, or even outside it, and touted as an "esoteric" discovery. But in a society such as ours very little can be kept private, and providing clues to "better living," tips on the stock market, and advice on clothing, furniture, and virtually every other artifact is the professional job of all the media of communication. Thus, a product associated with a respected group or class is likely to spread, through being publicized, to other groups as well. From here it moves to groups which aspire to be like the advocates. These are not necessarily lower in status, although often so described. It may be that the lower group innovates—as in the "do-it-yourself" fad, a phenomenon which all farmers and lower-income groups have been aware of all their lives—but it is more likely to be a somewhat esoteric group, as the bohemians who flocked to New York's Greenwich Village after World War I, followed by the middle-class New Yorkers after World War II.

Regardless of the direction of the flow, for a time the original possessors of a fashion-to-be will maintain the fashion for themselves and their kind, for people of the same social status are more likely to hear about people of their own level, especially in the upper classes. But after a time the innovation will cross the boundary line of the

²¹ Cf. Floyd H. Allport, *Social Psychology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924).

²² An amusing portrayal of the consequences of large masses of people doing the same thing at the same time, such as crossing the George Washington Bridge on a Thursday afternoon, may be found in Robert Coates's short story, "The Law," a description of the law of averages and what might happen to it some day.

groups who adopted it and pass into other groups, in the process losing some of its distinguishing characteristics.

The old drives in the new.—The story of fads is, then, one of constant change. And the changes themselves do not change, or at least not so much that they cannot be followed.

The process of change occurs necessarily at every point, leaving, as it were, a vacuum when the fashion departs for its next point. Eventually, the vacuum is filled, even to overflowing, by its successor. When a fad has reached full bloom, its distinguishing features become so blurred that some are totally lost. If everything is called "hi-fi," nothing is high-fidelity. Furthermore, if more than just certain classes are *aficionados*, the self-conscious among the class-conscious will want something new for themselves.

Thus, at some point before a dress design hits the Sears-Roebuck catalogue, a sports car the secondhand automobile dealer, and a modern chair the suburban rummage sale, once again it is time for a change.

*The feedback.*²³—Producers notoriously see an undifferentiated audience before their eyes. They tend so often just to count that they miscalculate demand.

William McPhee and James Coleman have suggested that, while one group may be oversaturated with a fad, another may be very receptive—and only accurate reporting (feedback) about each group can tell the whole story.²⁴ For example, since teen-agers are the major purchasers of records and sheet music and the major investors in juke boxes, and since these three commodities are the major tests of demand consulted by the producers, teen-agers can make or break a song. Disk jockeys also play a role in feedback, but it is primarily the "top" jockeys with the large teen-age followings who are the key informants. Yet there is another audience for popular music

to whom the producers have almost no access—the daytime radio listeners: the housewives, traveling salesmen, commuters. Their tastes are thus inferred—of all places—from teen-agers!

In other words, the skewed feedback of the music industry is responsible in part for the volatility of its fads; exaggerating as it does the tastes of an already erratic group considered as its primary audience, its fads fluctuate beyond all expectation. With perfect information, a normal distribution of tastes can be expected at most times and for most things. In certain industries, and among certain subgroups, the distribution is less likely to be normal, in part due to the pressures for new commodities, to the superficiality of the appeals themselves, to the publicity accompanying every product, and, in the case of teen-agers, to their unstable moods. When information comes only or largely from teen-agers, who are at the fringes of the distribution curve, so to speak, then the music industry is rendered excessively phrenetic. Kurt and Gladys Lang, in studying the Chicago MacArthur Day parade of 1951, found that the television reporting of this rather slow-moving and dull event was systematically distorted to give the impression of a vast crowd, a glorious spectacle, and an unremitting enthusiasm.²⁵ Here, as in the case of the popular-music industry, the requirements to hold an audience from switching to another station or channel or losing interest in popular music or a given song force such emphasis on the manic.

Hence, while the feedback from consumer to producer makes, at first, for a frenzied increase in a fashionable product, it may also make for a more rapid saturation than is warranted or, if the gauge is placed somewhere else in society, for an oversupply.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
AND
HEBREW UNIVERSITY

²³ This word itself has become something of a fad!

²⁴ "Mass Dynamics" (an unpublished research proposal on file at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University).

²⁵ "The Unique Perspective of Television," *American Sociological Review*, XVIII (February, 1953), 3-12.